16 March — 1 May 1983

REFLECTIONS OF REALITY IN JAPANESE ART

The Cleveland Museum of Art
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January 31, 1983

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EXHIBITION OF JAPANESE REALIST ART TO BE SHOWN ONLY IN CLEVELAND
March 16 - May 1

The only showing of the important exhibition, Reflections of Reality in Japanese Art, will be at The Cleveland Museum of Art from March 16 through May 1, 1983. Sherman E. Lee, the Museum's chief curator of Oriental art as well as its director for the last 25 years, has organized this final exhibition before he retires on July 1, 1983. The exhibition, which is the first to concentrate on realist traditions in the art of Japan, will not travel.

More than 100 paintings and nearly 30 sculptures, spanning the archaeological age to the 19th century, make up the exhibition. The majority are from major temples, shrines, museums, and private collections in Japan, including nine works of art designated as National Treasures of Japan and more than fifty designated as Important Cultural Properties. Significant loans will also come from American collections, including twenty works from the Cleveland Museum, which has one of the finest collections of Japanese art outside Japan.

The long and distinctive realist tradition in Japanese art is not well known in the West, where scholars have devoted more attention to Japanese decorative styles. This exhibition explores Japanese artists' pleasure in their landscape; their lively interest in the activities of all classes of society; their unsentimental, often sly, amusement at human behavior; and their respect for revered priest and leaders. In describing the natural world, Japanese realist artists did not attempt to suppress its ugly, unpleasant, or ridiculous aspects, and drew especially on these for their depictions of the supernatural, or unseen

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world, which fit easily into the Japanese definition of reality. The nature spirits of Shintō, the native religion, and the deities and demons that populated Buddhist paradises and hells had to be convincingly and realistically portrayed if they were to console the sufferer or frighten the sinner.

In the centuries following the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, Japanese art was predominantly religious and Buddhist, inspired by Chinese prototypes. During the Nara (645-794) and Heian (794-1185) periods, Buddhist deities were idealized, as befit images made for public worship, though disciples and other figures attending them often exhibited more individuality. The masks worn in Buddhist dance-dramas, gigaku and bugaku, well represented in the exhibition, offered greater possibilities for realistic, even exaggerated, representation.

These early essays in realism led to ever more powerful works, culminating in the great achievements of the Kamakura period (1185-1333). The narrative handscroll (e-maki), which became the dominant pictorial form for about 200 years beginning around 1150, was principally used to illustrate histories of famous Buddhist temples and priests, but also secular histories, especially military battles, and popular tales. Handscrolls were made of successive lengths of paper or silk, joined to make rolls often more than 40 feet long and averaging about one foot high; the viewer unrolled the scroll from right to left, rolling up the portion already viewed, to expose only one episode at a time.

Whether religious or secular, the e-maki narratives contained vividly realistic, sometimes satirical, depictions of people intent on the activities of daily life: gossiping ladies around a village well, workmen straining to pull a heavy loan, rough bearded mountain priests, elegant courtiers playing polo. Among the famous e-maki in the exhibition are three National Treasures: the late 12th century Legends of Kokawa Temple, tales of the miraculous founding of a popular Buddhist center; Ippen Shōnin E-den, dated 1299, which relates the life of the wandering monk Ippen; and one scroll of the Caricatures of Animals and People (mid-13th century), filled with keenly observed scenes of human activities.

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At this same time painted and sculpted portraits of religious and secular leaders became extremely individualized. Numerous portraits were carved from wood, a material which the Japanese sculptor handled with the greatest sensitivity and skill. Notable are the commanding portrait sculptures of priest Chōgen in meditation, the powerful regent Hojo Tokiyori wearing elaborate court costume, and the Zen priest Kakushin--and one of the most remarkable and individual of all painted portraits, a sketch of the eccentric Zen priest Ikkyū.

A similar realism was applied in Kamakura times to demons and other imaginary beings, like the glowering Goshojin: Attendant in the Court of Hell, and Raijin, the Thunder God. By assembling these figures from separately carved blocks of wood, the sculptor could suit the grain of the wood to each plane of his carving and indulge in daring explorations of movement of body and drapery.

The topography of Japan, particularly its famous mountains, rivers, and waterfalls, had been convincingly described in late Heian and Kamakura times in the narrative handscrolls. But during the Muromachi period (1392-1573), when Chinese styles dominated Japanese painting, the intimate Japanese landscape tradition was lost to major painters. A remarkable exception within the Chinese-influenced monochrome school is the famed painter Sesshu's faithful recording of a specific Japanese site--the National Treasure Ama no Hashidate, painted in the first decade of the 16th century.

Interest in Japanese subjects and the realistic portrayal of them, which had almost withered away during the Muromachi period, flourished again during the Edo period (1615-1868). The renewal of interest in realism was stimulated in part by the demands of a rising, prosperous merchant class, who clamored for paintings and prints representing their own lives and the activities of the lower classes: craftsmen at work, peasants, prostitutes, and performers. The National Treasure, Enjoying the Evening Cool, a two-fold screen depicting peasants resting outside

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their simple cottage, by the 17th-century painter Kusumi Morikage, is both decorative and realistic, a superb example of this new type of genre painting.

Japanese artists had long made sketches from nature, and during the Edo period artists of all schools made detailed studies of native flora and fauna. This practice was reinforced by interest in Western science and art, introduced to Japan in the 17th century by Dutch traders and Portugese missionaries.

Although the Japanese government excluded most foreigners from the 17th to the middle of the 19th century, and tried to bar Western ideas, it never tried to ban Western artistic styles. Many Japanese artists experimented with Western pictorial methods, especially the unfamiliar techniques of perspective and modeling in light and shade. One of the most important and successful of the 18th-century Japanese realists was Maruyama Okyo (1733-1795), whose keen observation of nature is well represented in sketches and finished works.

Perhaps the most important 19th-century painter influenced by Western realism was Watanabe Kazan (1793-1841). Interested in all of the urban and village life around him, he was also a critic of the government's closed-door policy against the West. Many of his best works--such as his portrait of the wistful giant sumo wrestler Ozora Buzaemon (1827), the sketch for and portrait of Ichikawa Beian (dated to 1837), and his affecting drawings recording his own arrest and imprisonment (1839)--are evidence of a new kind of art and thought.

Accompanying Reflections of Reality in Japanese Art is a small special exhibition, Japanese Prints: Realities of the "Floating World," which presents images of Edo's pleasure district.

The 350-page fully illustrated catalogue, Reflections of Reality in Japanese Art, with an essay by Dr. Lee and entries by Michael Cunningham with James Ulak, will be available for $25 at the Museum bookstore during the exhibition until May 1. Mail orders will be accepted only from Museum members. The catalogue will also be available from Indiana University Press for $60. There will be a free guide to the exhibition, based on the catalogue, as well as a catalogue for the accompanying Japanese print exhibition.

Free lectures, films, workshops, courses, and other educational programs have been scheduled to accompany Reflections of Reality.

To protect their delicate surfaces of silk and paper, paintings will be rotated midway through the exhibition, according to Japanese practice. Between the closing of the galleries at 6 pm on April 10 and their reopening on April 12, all handscrolls will be re-rolled to reveal different scenes, and some hanging scrolls and screens will be replaced by alternatives.

The exhibition has been organized jointly by The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Japanese Government, and The Japan Foundation. Generous additional support for the exhibition or programs comes from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities under the Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ohio Arts Council, the Japan-United States Friendship Commission, and the Asian Cultural Council.

Reflections of Reality in Japanese Art and all of the lectures, films, and programs accompanying it are free.

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For additional information, photographs, color slides, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.